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ABSTRACT

Analysis of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy and rhetoric during a particular campaign for social change will show that his strategies for social change, commonly referred to as "Satyagraha," are rooted in a unique rhetorical perspective. Gandhi repeatedly warned against the use of violent speech and acts, and he has prescribed and described what he meant by such speech and acts. Gandhi believed that violence was found in forms of speech. Nonviolent speech and acts, according to Gandhi, appear to be applicable to many communication situations and can be viewed as appropriate across situations, which meant that he had to attempt to answer the difficult question of how to translate them into practice. His answers were generally vague but he frequently reiterated that all responses were nonviolent. Gandhi felt nonviolent action was capable of being applied in both interpersonal and international contexts. Gandhi was an individual who offered a uniquely nonviolent rhetorical perspective that may be effectively employed by persons who strive to use peaceful communication strategies. (Fifty-eight notes are included, and 24 references are appended.) (MS)

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GANDHI'S NONVIOLENT RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

A UNIQUE STRATEGY FOR PEACE COMMUNICATION

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is recognized as a person who was concerned with strategies of peaceful communication. Analyses of his philosophy and some of his rhetoric during a particular campaign for social change make it possible to argue that his philosophy and strategies for social change, commonly referred to as Satyagraha, are rooted in a unique rhetorical perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to explicate Gandhi's rhetorical perspective as embedded in Gandhi's ideas of Satyagraha, in the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) during 1939-1944, in Harijan during 1939-1940, and in Gandhi-Jinnah Talks, 1944. Publications that deal with his ideas regarding Satyagraha, CWMG 1939-1944, Harijan 1939-1940, and Gandhi-Jinnah Talks 1944, are useful to examine because they reflect his general and specific recommendations about how persons should speak and act. The period and publications selected for this paper are useful to examine because they contain many samples of Gandhi's rhetoric during a critical historical period known as the Quit India Movement. Purposes of the movement were to gain independence for India from British dominance and to keep India united, as opposed to dividing India into Pakistan and India.

Gandhi repeatedly warned against the use of violent speech and acts, and he has prescribed and described what he

meant by such speech and acts. He also urged adherents to practice nonviolent speech and acts as they carried out their roles in Satyagraha campaigns.

Satyagrahis, persons who were active in Satyagraha campaigns, were advised by Gandhi to avoid harboring ill-will or bitterness toward evil-doers and were expected to refrain from the use of inappropriate offensive language.[1] Rules for Satyagrahis that were written by Gandhi urged that "no intentional injury in thought, word or deed" were allowed, that "swearing and cursing" were to be excluded, and that if some persons did insult officials, Satyagrahis were to protect the officials even at the risk of their lives.[2] Satyagrahi qualifications and duties were to avoid embarrassing evil-doers,[3] to have no trace of bitterness toward opponents,[4] and to be charitable toward adversaries.[5]

Gandhi believed that violence was found in forms of speech. He therefore repeatedly admonished that Satyagrahis should have neither a trace of bitterness in them nor violence in their language.[6] He urged Satyagrahis to ask for forgiveness "for every unkind word thoughtlessly uttered or unkind deed done to any one."[7] In addition, Gandhi suggested that Satyagrahis who were engaged in non-cooperation should not lie.[8]

There were many channels through which Gandhi communicated his ideas regarding violent and nonviolent

speech and action. In a letter to a friend, for example, Gandhi elegantly stated his convictions about violent and nonviolent speech: "Violence means injuring a creature through bodily action or speech or in thought. . . . Non-violence means not injuring any creature in this manner."[9] In another instance, during an exchange of editorials with a critic of Satyagraha who had suggested Satyagraha campaigns included violence, Gandhi wrote

> I should also remind correspondents that the word Satyagraha is often most loosely used and is made to cover veiled violence. But as the author of the word I may be allowed to say that it excludes every form of violence, direct or indirect, veiled or unveiled, and whether in thought, word or deed.[10]

So insistent was Gandhi about nonviolent speech and acts that he believed their opposites could defeat a worthy cause. He wrote that a successful Satyagraha campaign should exclude violence in "any shape or form, whether in thought, speech, or deed."[11]

Gandhi frequently advised diverse audiences that consisted of a variety of persons involved in a Satyagraha campaign, but he targeted more specific audiences, too. During a speech in which Gandhi addressed India's Congressional members, he stated that "our speech has often belied our profession."[12] In this setting, the reference was to reforming administrative processes, and Gandhi was concerned that speech had been directed toward others that

attempted to "destroy," a form of speech he considered inappropriate for members of Congress.[13] On another occasion, Gandhi stated: "Our violence in word and deed is but a feeble echo of the surging violence of thought in us."[14]

Gandhi admitted that nonviolence was frequently more difficult to live up to than it was to talk about.[15] When asked why he and others had failed to convince an opponent, Gandhi asserted that the failure had occurred because some had not been nonviolent, had sworn, and had been indifferent toward their opponents with language choices.[16] Gandhi claimed that "I may have controlled my tongue but I had not put a similar control on the speech of others."[17] Gandhi also attempted to monitor his own speech and chastised himself for being unable at times to live up to his own expectations. During an encounter with Gandhi, an official in the Indian Congress asserted that Gandhi was wrong about the implications and applications of nonviolence.[18] Gandhi admitted that he had exposed the official "to ridicule and unkind attacks" and as a result, he had been weak and unjust.[19] Although Gandhi claimed his weakness was an accident, such an admission can be viewed as a failure to monitor his speech and actions. Gandhi implied there were difficulties that had to be overcome as people tried to create new patterns of speech that were nonviolent. He made

this point when he stated that "inertia . . . ties the mind down to old ruts."[20] While Gandhi may have admitted there were difficulties that had to be overcome in the search for new speech patterns, he nevertheless tried to help adherents of nonviolence by his instruction.

Gandhi gave specific examples of violent speech and acts. "We must rid ourselves of petty jealousies and bickerings."[21] Gandhi believed that there was no better way to lose a cause than to abuse an opponent.[22] He made harsh indictments of violent rhetorical practices in which he believed Indian Congressional officials had participated, and he included himself in the indictments.

Gandhi was concerned with the violent speech and actions of officials, and he was also concerned with the effects of such speech and actions. He charged that

> we have been betrayed into violence in our dealings with one another. We have quarreled with one another in our committees; . . . We have refused to carry out instructions of the Working Committee. We have formed rival groups wanting to seize power.[23]

Such examples of violent speech and acts were considered by Gandhi to be responsible for preventing India's Congress from becoming highly credible. Gandhi believed that the use of violent speech and actions "reduced our professions of non-violence to a mockery."[24] Gandhi urged Congress that the goal of independence only could be reached by "evidence of our non-violent speech and action," and he further

believed that "strictest adherence" to nonviolent speech and action was crucial.[25] There were times when Congressional members agreed that nonviolence was the best policy, and they would adopt nonviolence as their means temporarily.

The policy of nonviolence that Congress adopted, asserted Gandhi, "should put an easy restraint upon the speech, writings and actions of Congressmen in their dealings with the [Muslim] League [the Muslim League sought to divide India into Pakistan and India] and its members."[26] Such restraints, believed Gandhi, could lead to communal unity that was real and lasting.[27] Gandhi was hopeful that Congressional officials could serve as models of nonviolent speakers and activists, but he also used others as models of nonviolence.

An instance in which Gandhi instructed readers about the value of nonviolent speech and action through Harijan was when he related a story about Sardar Prithvisingh.[28] Prithvisingh was a revolutionary who for years believed that only violent means would bring about India's freedom from the British. According to Gandhi, Prithvisingh's violent and daring behaviors were unsurpassed. "He was himsa [violence] in action personified."[29] Prithvisingh went to Gandhi, submitted himself to a potential life behind bars because of the many acts of violence he had committed, and chose to behave nonviolently in his speech and action. He

became a model prisoner and an outspoken proponent for nonviolence, was ultimately released from prison, and devoted himself to a life of nonviolence. A page from Prithvisingh's diary, reprinted in Harijan, stated that he had finally realized his violent behaviors "would not enrich my nation nor make any contribution to the uplift of humanity."[30] The pedagogical value of such revelations were important to Gandhi, and he used such episodes to teach the lessons of nonviolent speech and action.

Gandhi consistently stressed the idea that there were forms of violent speech and action such as swearing at and insulting opponents. In addition, Gandhi urged Satyagrahis to avoid embarrassing others and to ask for forgiveness of unkind words they had thoughtlessly uttered. Lies, attempts to destroy opponents, ridicule, unkind attacks, petty jealousies, bickerings, and quarreling also were considered violent forms of speech to Gandhi. He encouraged adherents such as individual Satyagrahis, the groups that followed them, Congressional officials, and readers of Harijan to avoid the practice of such forms of speech and action. He also used models as pedagogues in order to convey his ideas regarding nonviolent speech and action. Gandhi also believed that nonviolent speech and action had cross-situational applicability. Gandhi clearly viewed nonviolent speech and acts as appropriate for a wide variety of

situations. He was so convinced about the possible applications of nonviolent speech and acts that he repeatedly argued that his methods were capable of being universally applied:

> In referring to the universality of Satyagraha I have time and again observed . . . that it is capable of application in the social no less than in the political field. It may equally be employed against Government, society, or one's own family, father, mother, husband or wife as the case may be.[31]

Peace scholar Bose defended Gandhi's position by asserting that Gandhi challenged himself to bring about a state of improved welfare for all persons.[32] She has stated that the welfare of all became a primary objective of Gandhi's and suggested that in order to achieve peace and harmony, Gandhi's nonviolent techniques, as manifested in Satyagraha, were necessarily universally oriented.[33]

Other scholars who have analyzed nonviolence have made similar claims for Gandhi's techniques.[34] Bandyopadhyaya has claimed that individual, group, and mass nonviolent campaigns were possible in Gandhi's view.[35] Nonviolent campaigns also could be used as tools for resistance to tyrannical governments, and nonviolence may be considered useful as a national defense policy.[36] Traditionally, nonviolence has been most closely associated with mass movement campaigns for social change. However, creative thinkers may discover that Gandhi's techniques may be

applicable in interpersonal and small group settings as well. Gandhi and others clearly have suggested that nonviolence may be used for resolving differences, for confronting oppressors, for rooting out evil, and may be employed at "any level of social interaction."[37]

Nonviolent speech and acts, according to Gandhi, appear to be applicable to many communication situations and can be viewed as appropriate across situations. As we know from his background, Gandhi engaged in significant rhetorical confrontations that ranged from interpersonal to international. As might be expected, his search for effective means of resolving differences necessarily demanded that such means would be applicable to a range of communication contexts.

Gandhi was emphatic about the widespread utility of nonviolence. When one reader asserted, "You may inspire a few persons to study ahimsa [nonviolence] but society as a whole is not likely to take it,"[38] Gandhi responded, "The correspondent doubts in substance the universal application of ahimsa, and asserts that society has made little progress towards it."[39] In order to support his views about the applicability of nonviolence, Gandhi turned to the All India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) and to Indian scholars. The A.I.C.C., stated Gandhi in his reply to the reader, has affirmed that

> non-violence continues to be the weapon against all internal disturbances. . . . That means that

> ahimsa for all occasions and all purposes has been recognized by a society, however small it may be, and that ahimsa as a remedy to be used by society has made fair strides.[40]

Gandhi added that Indian scholar Maulana, "a great thinker of keen intellect and vast reading," had experiences that taught him that it was "ahimsa alone" that could free India.[41] Gandhi invoked the name of another prominent Indian scholar when he stated: "Jawaharlal is not a man to stand in awe of anyone. His study of history and contemporary events is second to none. It is after mature thought that he has accepted ahimsa as a means for the attainment of Swaraj" [freedom].[42] Gandhi admitted that in the event nonviolence failed to achieve freedom, Jawaharlal would urge violence as a means of achieving freedom,[43] but Gandhi apparently did not feel that Jawaharlal's view diminished the value or applicability of nonviolence as a desirable means toward the desirable end of freedom. In yet another example, Gandhi's belief that his methods could be applied to a variety of situations is clear when he stated:

> I have been practicing with scientific precision non-violence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of over fifty years. I have applied it in every walk of life, domestic, institutional, economic, and political. I know of no single case in which it has failed. Where it has seemed sometimes to have failed, I have ascribed it to my imperfections.[44]

Critics of Gandhi's views were frequently willing to recognize the utility of Satyagraha for internal affairs, but not for external affairs. For example, some believed

that Satyagraha would not work in the event India were invaded by a foreign power, and Gandhi addressed this concern by arguing that many members of Congress believed nonviolence could be "applied to all fields, including internal disorder and external aggression."[45] To illustrate further his conviction that nonviolence was applicable to foreign aggressors, Gandhi stated that if India could recognize the "matchless beauty of non-violence. . . . she will become unconquerable in the face of any invaders."[46] He reasoned that a small state that learned the art of nonviolence was immune, but that a small state "no matter how powerfully armed," in the midst of a combination of larger well-armed States, was not.[47]

In order to support this position, Gandhi did not have to look far because World War II was raging at the time, and Germany's militaristic force could be viewed as a small state that was powerfully armed. "Hitlerism," as Gandhi referred to this force, "means naked ruthless force reduced to an exact science," which "worked with scientific precision."[48] As Gandhi witnessed the violence of the war, he wrote that what "is going on before our very eyes is a demonstration of the futility of violence as also of Hitlerism."[49] Gandhi suggested that Germany could not hold subjugated nations perpetually, and he stated "that all the blood that has been spilled by Hitler has added not a

millionth part of an inch to the world's moral stature."[50] These lessons were directed toward Indians as well as the world powers. In the event India was to first "demonstrate the efficacy of non-violence . . . in our own country . . . we can expect to influence the tremendously armed powers of the west."[51]

In order to argue successfully that nonviolence could be applied to many situations, Gandhi had to answer the question of how such notions of nonviolent speech and acts were to be translated into practice. A rhetorical exchange between Gandhi and a member of Congress illustrated the difficulty Gandhi faced when he was asked how persons should go about nonviolently resolving communal riots.

In this exchange, Gandhi simply asserted that Congress had yet to discover "a sure method of dealing successfully . . . with communal riots."[52] Gandhi further stated: "I have no ready-made concrete plan. . . . Only I have no choice as to the means. It must always be purely non-violent."[53] Gandhi's vagueness as to how to act nonviolently was perhaps nowhere more clearly stated than in his assertion that the

> opportunity comes to everyone almost daily. There are communal clashes, there are <u>dacoities</u> [<u>dacoits</u> are persons who robbed and murdered while roving in gangs], there are wordy duels. In all these things those who are truly non-violent can and will demonstrate it.[54]

Gandhi believed that millions could be trained in the art of nonviolence[55] and that the effects of such training could have extraordinary consequences. With one eye toward independence and the other toward the violence of World War II, Gandhi stated that he could not support Britain in the war effort even if Britain would as a result guarantee India's independence.[56] He further stated that he was certain in his "belief that only non-violence can save India and the world from self-extinction."[57]

On another occasion, Gandhi articulated his beliefs about the possible consequences of nonviolence, but this time he was concerned with how only a few persons could bring about exceptional results if their nonviolence was genuine:

> A small body of determined spirits fixed by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history. It has happened before and it may happen again if the non-violence . . . . is unalloyed gold, not mere glittering tinsel.[58]

According to Gandhi, millions could use nonviolence or a few could use nonviolence. In either situation, he believed the results that could be brought about could be consequential.

Individual, social, political, national, and international issues, believed Gandhi, were resolvable through nonviolent means. Individual problems within families, problems among communal groups, and problems among nations were addressed through Gandhi's ideas regarding

Satyagraha, through CWMG, and through Harijan. That Gandhi intended nonviolence to be used in numerous situations is clear in each of these sources.

Gandhi's vision of nonviolence appears to have been that there were many forms of violent speech and action, and he specifically stated several examples of each. By identifying examples of violent speech and action and then urging adherents to avoid such practices, Gandhi made the point that nonviolence included speech and acts. Nonviolent speech and action are thus a consistent and recurring theme and may be viewed as an important aspect of Gandhi's rhetorical perspective.

Gandhi believed also that nonviolent speech and action were applicable across situations. Nonviolent speech and action were not considered by Gandhi to be situation bound. Nonviolent action was capable of being applied in both interpersonal and international contexts. In many instances, Gandhi suggested that one's speech could be considered violent. Further, Gandhi repeatedly encouraged individuals and masses to refrain from the use of such rhetorical strategies. Finally, viewed in this manner, Gandhi may be perceived as one who offers us a uniquely nonviolent rhetorical perspective that may be usefully employed by persons who strive to use peaceful communication strategies.

Notes

[1]Mahatma Gandhi, Satyagraha, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951), p. 77.

[2]Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[3]Ibid., p. 87.

[4]Ibid., p. 193.

[5]Ibid., p. 194.

[6]Mahatma Gandhi, Young India: 1919-1922, (Triplicane, Madras, S. E.: S. Ganesan, 1922), p. 55.

[7]Ibid., p. 64.

[8]Ibid., p. 623.

[9]Raghavan Iyer, gen ed The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), vol. 1: Civilization, Politics and Religion, by Mahatma Gandhi, p. 87.

[10]Gandhi, Satyagraha, p. 201.

[11]Ibid., p. 56.

[12]Mahadev Desai, "The New Technique: My Laxity," Harijan, (Poona), 13 May 1939, p. 121.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Mahadev Desai, "The Decision and After: Cowardice Worse than Violence," Harijan, (Poona), 17 June 1939, p. 166.

[15]Desai, "The New Technique: My Laxity," p. 121.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "I Was Unjust Because Weak," Harijan, (Poona), 22 September 1940, p. 292.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Question Box: How to Cultivate Ahimsa?" Harijan, (Poona), 21 July 1940, p. 215.

[21]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "To the People of Rajkot," Harijan, (Poona), 18 March 1939, p. 53.

[22]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Causes," Harijan, (Poona), 28 October 1939, p. 320.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]M. K. Gandhi, "Hindu-Muslim Unity," Harijan, (Poona), 7 October, 1939, p. 296.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "The Old Revolutionary," Harijan, (Poona), 30 September 1939, p. 292.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Gandhi, Satyagraha, p. 342.

[32]Anima Bose, "A Gandhian Perspective on Peace," Journal of Peace Research 2 (1981): 159-62.

[33]Ibid., pp. 159-64.

[34]Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, Social and Political Thought of Gandhi (Bombay: Allied, 1969), pp. 235-340; Guiliano Pontara, "The Rejection of Violence in Gandhian Ethics of Conflict Resolution," Journal of Peace Research 2 (1965): 197; Virginia L. Muller, "Orwell and Gandhi: The Future of Non-Violence," Cogito 1 (1983): 268.

[35]Bandyopadhyaya, pp. 235-340.

[36]Ibid., pp. 341-75.

[37]Muller, p. 268.

[38]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Is Non-Violence Impossible?" Harijan, (Poona), 11 August 1940, p. 244.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "To Every Briton," Harijan, (Poona), 6 July 1940, p. 185.

[45]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "There Is Violence In It," Harijan, (Poona), 4 August 1940, p. 229.

[46]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Notes: A Striking Thought," Harijan, (Poona), 7 October 1939, p. 293.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "How to Combat Hitlerism," Harijan, (Poona), 22 June 1940, p. 172.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Not Yet," Harijan, (Poona), 1 June 1940, p. 148.

[52]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Conundrums," Harijan, (Poona), 30 September 1939, p. 288.

[53]Ibid., p.289.

[54]Mohandas K. Gandhi, "Both Happy and Unhappy," Harijan, (Poona), 29 June 1940, p. 180.

[55]Mahatma Gandhi, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Navajivan Trust, vol. 78: Preface (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1979), 70: xi (hereafter cited as CWMG).

[56]Gandhi CWMG, 75: 190.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Gandhi CWMG, 68: 81.

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